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ABSTRACT

A local history course offered as a semester elective to seniors has as its purpose the study of the local community as a microcosm of the United States. The basic principle is to reinforce what the student has already learned in previous history courses. The course proceeds through a chronological sequence of units about various periods of the town's development. Each unit contains a core of information and activities shared by the whole class, but also requires creative and independent work by each individual. While many traditional social studies techniques are employed, this course differs in the use of primary sources and community resources. Extensive onsite observations and investigations give students an opportunity to form and text hypotheses from raw data. While no formal evaluation has been made on the results of the program in terms of its cognitive objectives, students have indicated the success of their experience in informal written evaluations. (Relevant ERIC documents and other resources on the program conclude the profile.) (Author/KSM)

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profiles of promise 10

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PROFILES OF PROMISE are descriptive brochures that highlight innovative social studies and social advocacy projects which teachers and administrators can apply ideas to their own classrooms or schools.

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FINDING RELEVANCE IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD:

A COURSE IN LOCAL HISTORY

The pursuit of relevance has led social studies teachers and curriculum developers through a labyrinth of trial and error and only occasionally into success. One common approach has been to downplay the traditional historical orientation and zero in on here and now. Current events, minority studies, contemporary crises, and social ills have become the meat of many social studies programs. Broadening the student's outlook through the study of international affairs or exotic foreign cultures has been another popular approach.

For those who advocate contemporaneity or universality as remedies, it may come as something of a shock to learn that there are students of the "now" generation who get hooked on graveyards, abandoned millsites, and dusty records in the town clerk's office. Yet these are exactly the kinds of places where senior students are finding relevance in a small town in southeastern Massachusetts.

Oliver Ames High School in North Easton, Massachusetts, offers a local history course as a semester elective to all seniors. Students in this New England community are finding their own answers to "Who am I?" by starting where they live and investigating their own familiar surroundings. Their opportunity to do this is largely the result of the combined efforts of Duncan Oliver, Assistant Principal, who initiated the course two years ago, and Hazel Varella, Chairman of the Social Studies Department, who currently teaches the course. Oliver Ames High School serves about 700 students in grades ten through twelve.

REPEATING AMERICAN HISTORY

Beginning with the central purpose of studying the local community as a microcosm of the United States, the course proceeds through a chronological sequence of units about various periods in the town's development. Each unit contains a core of information and activities to be shared by the whole class, but also requires creative and independent work by each individual. The units, ranging from one to four weeks each, include: Geographic Background, Indians of the Area, First Settlers, Background Sequences, American Revolution, Post-Revolution to 1850s, The Civil War, The Gilded Age, 1910 to 1945, and Since World War II.

Although the general outline resembles that of a United States history course, any senior electing Local History will already have taken United States History or American Studies. In Local History, the focus is on the experiences of Easton during each period of American development. Thus, while the student reinforces what he has already learned in a national context, he adds new and meaningful elements. Examples from the course illustrate this basic principle.

In the unit on Indians, students learn about local tribes, plot the location of campsites in Easton, find out how Easton settlers acquired Indian land, and examine Indian artifacts found in the area. Students learn to identify periods and styles of architecture from direct observation of local examples when they study the unit, "Background Sequence." Although heavy emphasis is placed on Easton's patriot activities in the "American Revolution" unit, the students also learn about the experiences of British soldiers imprisoned in the town. They are asked to speculate on why the town's historian had so little to say about resident Tories. In studying the period between the Revolution and the Civil War, the students learn that Easton was Republican, rather than Federalist, and they learn why. They find that some of the Irish immigrants who came to America in great numbers in the 1840s found their way to Easton and played an important part in its development, as did immigrants from Sweden and Portugal who came later in the century. Students learn that long before the golden spike was driven to complete the first transcontinental railroad, the iron horse was already serving their own home town. But they also learn about the "horse thieves west of Bay Road," the witches in the Poquanticut section, and Buck's "ghost mill" that operated all by itself. In the Civil War era, the underground railway becomes not just a line plotted on a textbook map, but a "station" in Easton where weary slaves stopped over on

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the long flight to freedom. The Gilded Age comes to life through the study of local architecture. Visits to the industrial sites of the Ames Shovel and Tool Co., the H.H. Richardson Co., and other local manufacturers illustrate where the money came from to build the impressive homes, churches, and public buildings of Easton. While studying the first half of the 20th century, the students begin to appreciate their home town's contribution to the great campaigns to "make the world safe for democracy," but they also learn the disquieting fact that during that same period the Ku Klux Klan flourished for a brief period of time in Easton. Through learning experiences such as these, American history comes to life.

DIGGING AROUND

In all fields of endeavor there are spectators and participants. While "spectating" may be more popular, participating is more fun. History is no exception. Local History students do a lot of looking, but they do more. They are personally and intimately involved in putting together a composite picture of Easton's history. The work done by each year's class broadens the base of data from which the next year's class can work. Already anyone who goes to the town library looking for materials on local history is very likely to be referred to the high school, for the high school now has, in many respects the better collection.

More than 700 slides, largely prepared by students, have been put together for use in the course. All pictures owned by the Historical Society have been made into slides by students. Students then use these old photos as references and take pictures of the same locations today, thus recording the changes time has wrought. Many documents, town records, and news clippings have been reprinted or preserved on microfilm for use by the Local History class and others.

Appeals to the community have brought in a great variety of items for the resource collection. When the course was initiated, the only complete set of the town's annual reports was kept locked in the safe at the town clerk's office and was generally inaccessible. Now, as a result of the school's appeal for donations of missing copies, five complete sets of town reports have been gathered.

On the surface, group activities for the class do not appear to be particularly different in nature from those of any good social studies class. They involve reading, examining slides and photos, listening to lectures, and entering into discussions about problems and issues. At a closer glance, however, some significant differences from the typical social studies program can be detected. First, the students deal as much as possible with primary sources of information. Inquiry, forming and testing hypotheses, and being one's own historian are integral and necessary characteristics of the course. Second, the students are frequently out in the community in organized class field trips and on individual explorations. Such extensive on-site observation and investigation would not be possible in the study of any other type of history.

In most cases, individual projects requiring field work are done outside normal school hours; but when necessary, students are released from school to carry on their investigations. The range of possible topics for study is as wide as the scope of the students' imaginations and interests. The student who becomes intrigued with the local cemetery may make rubbings of the more unique headstones. But he will probably also identify the type of stone, the probable age and quarry source, and the meaning of the symbols and epitaph carved on it. The data he gathers may help another student to fill in a gap in a genealogical record he is piecing together. Another student may be tracing the route of a dried-up canal bed and putting together a map showing the old commercial and industrial sites served by the canal. Still another may be combing an area with a metal detector, hoping to uncover long-buried iron artifacts. While one way of digging up the past may be to look for buried items, someone else's method of uncovering the past may be to interview elderly residents and record their recollections and impressions for the first time. In numerous activities such as these, the students in Local History experience the quiet excitement of being one's own historian and seeing fresh meaning come forth from extraneous bits of raw data.

FRINGE BENEFITS

There can be no question that Local History students finish the course with a deeper understanding of history than do their counterparts in courses relying mainly on pre-digested secondary sources with pre-determined answers to pre-arranged questions. They can also achieve a sense of personal accomplishment in having done something unique and related to their own special interests. There are, at the same time, some significant fringe benefits for the school and community.

When Duncan Oliver initiated the course, he was Chairman of the Social Studies Department, grappling with the perennial problem encountered by department chairmen--how to improve the curriculum. A decision was made to offer a variety of semester electives and to poll the student body as to its preferences in course offerings. Surprisingly, over 100 students indicated a desire for some sort of local history course, even though it was not listed on the survey. Nothing could have been more satisfying to Oliver, who has his own strong penchant for local history.

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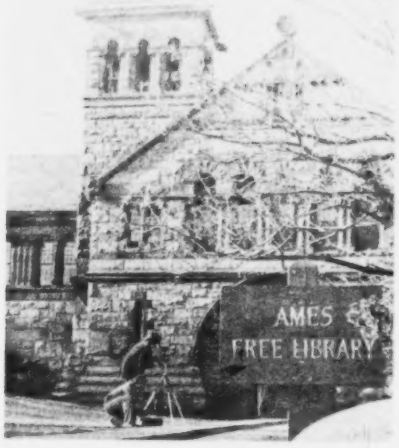
Learning to use the



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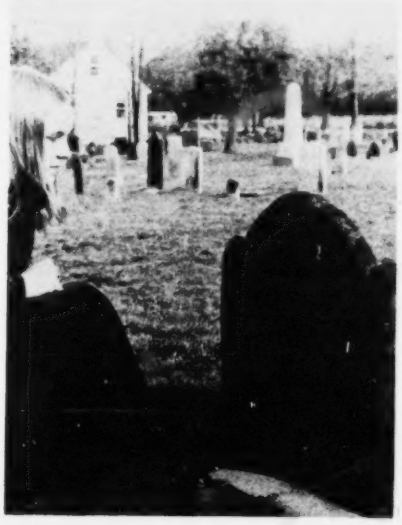

Who am I? Where

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mmunity is the community.
to find out what its all about.

did I come from?

Oliver is now Assistant Principal and, as such, has a broader set of concerns. He finds that Local History has other pay-offs besides satisfying a desire expressed by the student body. He is particularly pleased that some of the students who have typically shown a propensity toward academic failure and disciplinary problems have developed a more positive attitude toward school. Informal observations by Oliver and by teachers have shown that these students' academic performance has improved. They have generally become more mature and responsible.

The popularity of the course has spilled over to the students' families. About 50 students are presently enrolled in the course, and their parents are now demanding a piece of the action. The ever-obliging Duncan Oliver now finds himself teaching Local History for adults one evening a week.

The course has also done much to cement good community-school relations. The activities of Local History students have caught the attention of the townspeople, and reaction has been most favorable. Older residents, town officials, and businessmen have made available their homes, their facilities, and their personal records and memorabilia to inquiring students.

Hazel Varella is a past president of the Easton Historical Society and a life-long resident of the town. Her father is employed by the Ames family, for whom the high school is named. Oliver, although not native to the town, is from the area, and is the current President of the Historical Society. Their close ties to the community have contributed to the program's success.

Until now, only one written history of Easton has been available, The History of the Town of Easton, Massachusetts, by William L. Chaffin. It was published in 1886. As a result of the revival of interest in local history, a new volume is now being prepared. This book will review the town's history since 1886. The resources gathered by classes in Local History will facilitate production of this new history, and it is likely that some students will find themselves credited in the book for their contributions. One current requirement of the course is for students to write a paper in historical style about some aspect of the town's history. Some of these papers will be included in the forthcoming volume, which will appear in time for the big community celebration in 1975 to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the town's incorporation as well as the 200th anniversary of the American Revolution.

PROVINCIALISM?

For each individual, the degree to which anything becomes relevant is in direct proportion to the identification of a meaningful relationship with it. Oliver Ames High School is only one of a number of schools that has learned the lesson that students most easily find relevance in their own environment. Not all community-centered programs are set up to study historical development. There is no reason why they necessarily should be, but there are a number of conditions which tend to orient Oliver Ames students toward local history. First, a fairly large percentage have lived in the area all or most of their lives. Second, the town has a long and colorful history stretching over 250 years. Third, there are teachers with strong community ties and a feeling for local history. However, it is not necessary to have ancient Indian campsites, colonial cemeteries, or documents from the era of the American Revolution to develop a course in local history. Teachers in virtually any locality, no matter how recently settled, can find the necessary resources to develop their own program if they mobilize community assistance.

Many teachers might balk at such a program as being too provincial or too ethnocentric for relevance to 20th century Americans. To keep things in perspective, it should be remembered that Local History is offered at Oliver Ames, not as a total curriculum, but only as a one-semester elective. Among the other courses available are World Cultures, Problems in Urban Affairs, Political and Economic Problems, Comparative Government, Economics, Population, Philosophy, Psychology, Russian History, and Problematic Sociology. Thus, there is little basis for concern that graduates of Oliver Ames will leave school with too parochial a frame of reference as a result of their Social Studies program.

In the last unit of the course, which deals with the period since World War II, the class turns its attention from study of the past to contemplation of the future. They examine the many changes taking place in the town--decline of traditional industries, growth of residential population, demands for alteration of the political structure--and they begin to speculate about where their town is heading. It is only because they have the perspective of two and one-half centuries that they are able to cope intelligently with questions like: Out of all that we have experienced, what deserves to be preserved? What should change? What kind of a community do we want, and how do we achieve this? What will it cost? What will we gain? Questions like these are pertinent to anyone, anywhere; but they are most easily asked and answered by those who have first found relevance in their own backyard.

EVALUATION

Some years ago a university history professor was addressing a group of high school teachers, and he pleaded with them to "just teach your students to love history and then send them to us." Not many history teachers would be content with such a limited objective, but certainly most would feel that some-

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thing important had happened if students left their courses so engrossed with the subject that they wanted to go on learning. Remember that Local History was initiated because of a desire to make the social studies curriculum more relevant to student interests and needs. Students asked for Local History and got it. One indication of the success of Local History is that, in competition with other electives open to seniors, enrollment in the course is increasing. There are approximately 20% more seniors enrolled in the course this year than there were last year.

While no formal evaluation has been made on the results of the program in terms of its cognitive objectives, students have been asked to write informal evaluations. A few comments from these evaluations indicate the success students are experiencing:

> *"I think Local History was very interesting. The biggest effort I have ever put in was in my major project at Belcher Malleable Iron Company, actually going out and meeting other people. That proved to me I can do something I never thought I had the nerve to do."*
>
> *"I feel a Local History course is very beneficial to a student. I know I learned many things about a town I have lived in for 18 years. Each town should have a similar course and encourage students to participate. It is also valuable to know about your own town government and how a town functions."*
>
> *"I thought that this course was valuable in that it made me notice the surroundings in which I live. I had seen the places before, but they now have more significance and meaning. When I see a site now, it takes on a life of its own, and I can imagine what it was like years ago. Also, it makes me aware that the town has a character of its own, unique from any other town."*

ERIC DOCUMENTS

ED 017 500 - Place Names in the Classroom - MF - $.65, HC - $3.29.

ED 051 034 - Finding Community: A Guide to Community Research and Action - Available from James E. Freel and Associates, 577 College Avenue, Palo Alto, California 94306. $3.45.

ED 056 940 - The Local Community: A Handbook for Teachers - Available from MacMillan Company, School Division, 866 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022. $5.32.

For more information

WRITE:

Mrs. Hazel Varella
Chairman
Social Studies Department
Oliver Ames High School
North Easton, Massachusetts 02356

READ:

Burgdorf, Lucille P. and Irene F. Harney. "Challenge of the City: Study Plan for a Relevant Topic." Instructor. April 1970, pp. 100-104.

Cook, Don S. "Population Education Through Inquiry into Primary Sources." Social Education. April 1972, pp. 396-399.

"How to Utilize Community Resources." How To Do It Series. National Council for the Social Studies, 1201 Sixteenth Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. Order No. 495-14878, $.25.

Hertzberg, Hazel W. Teaching the Age of Homespun. Albany, New York: Bureau of Secondary Curriculum Development, New York State Department of Education, 1965, 84pp. Available through Publications Distribution Unit, State Education Building, Albany, New York 12224.

van Leuvan, Daniel L. "Local History Aids the Teaching of American History." Social Studies. November 1971, pp. 247-248.

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